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ABSTRACT

This paper expresses concern that teachers do not agree on when, where, and how to deal with the non-standard English of blacks and other minorities. Sections of the paper discuss a definition of Black English, some forms and patterns of Black English, the language development of black children, the black child and the school, implications for teachers, and suggestions for teaching standardized English to blacks. The paper concludes that teachers can teach black children standardized English without forcing those children to give up their non-standard dialect. (RL)

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BLACK ENGLISH - A LEGITIMATE DIALECT OF ENGLISH

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BLACK ENGLISH - A LEGITIMATE DIALECT OF ENGLISH

The enclosed article is the result of my attempts to identify Black English or the Black dialect.

Black English has been called "bad" English in the past, but is now described as non-standard English. I agree with the authors who consider Black English a legitimate dialect of English.

I am concerned that as educators we do not agree on when (at what grade), where and how to deal with the non-standard English of Blacks and other minorities.

Some suggestions are offered here for the teacher, such as choral speaking, group dramatization and role playing. The idea is to give the child the opportunity to imitate standard English, without the pressure of being corrected or trying to imitate the sometimes phony examples presented to him by thoughtless teachers.

I am gratified by the efforts to give Black English the same respect as other aspects of Black culture.

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of this paper is the result of my personal interest in the dialect termed Black English, or non-standard English; once called "bad English." My interest stems from the fact that I am Black, and I am aware that in my informal speech I use Black English and understand much that is used by other Blacks.

I have been interested, perhaps passively, in the dialect of members of my ethnic group since high school days. I can remember vividly my embarassment in a high school class when the only other black student stood up and asked a question, using a form of BE incorrectly. I wondered, "Hasn't she learned better English in twelve years of schooling?"

I was the only Black student in most of my classes, and for some reason, forgotten now, I always practiced over to myself exactly what I was going to say orally before saying anything aloud, to be sure that I did not make errors, grammatical or otherwise.

I remember disliking the dialect poems of Paul Lawrence Dunbar, because I had been taught that dialect speech was "bad English." It was while I was a student at an all black college that I became aware of the beautiful poems written by Dunbar in standard English, and discovered that he was not illiterate. What schools do to children!

I learned to enjoy and appreciate the dialect poems too, for their humor, which was their purpose, and the elements of human emotions that they were meant to depict. As a teacher I can now use these poems with white and

black students, sharing with them the rich heritage of a father's love and pride in "Little Brown Baby," and the humor which they can identify with in "In the Morning."

DEFINITION OF BLACK ENGLISH

As I searched through different sources for a definition of dialect I came upon the statement, "a corrupt form of a language," (Malmstrom, 1967), who also identified dialect as, "a variety of language spoken by a distinct group of people in a definite place." Malmstrom states that most people speak two or more dialects.

What is Black English or the Black dialect? Is it the slang heard so prevalently among Blacks? Is it the unique word usage or structures characteristic of so-called disadvantaged Blacks? Or is it a combination of both: all of the language patterns and structures peculiar to Blacks in America?

Bentley and Crawford (1973) state that "Black English is a legitimate dialect of English, which reflects a rich cultural tradition in America." O'Donnell (1974) states that "Black English is not just a linguistic system. It is also the expression of Black culture, an expression steeped in the tradition of Black oral culture."

According to Shuy (1970) "...aspects of the Black English system can be said to be different from the standard English system. It is difficult to see how the difference can be said to be deficient." And, finally,

Kochman (1969) asks, "why English spoken with a French accent is considered charming and is socially acceptable, while English spoken with a Black accent is not." No one laughs at the Bostonian who says "cah" for car, because that is an acceptable accent.

SOME FORMS AND PATTERNS OF BLACK ENGLISH

Malstrom (1973) identifies three patterns of Black English as (1) zero copula, (2) the zero possessive, and (3) undifferentiated pronouns. This is explained as (1) the omission of BE in certain sentence patterns where standard English requires it. For example:

Non Standard	Standard
He runnin'.	He is running.
Dey old.	They are old.
She a teacher.	She is a teacher.
This Bob hat.	This is Bob's hat.

(2) the omission of the possessive suffix, as shown in the last statement above. This reminds me of an amusing statement made by one third grader at a North Philadelphia school. There was one little girl who was constantly telling the other children what to do, or, as we say, she was very bossy, until one day a boy told her, "You act like you somebody mother." She was very hurt but I think she "got the message," (3) when the same forms are used indiscriminately for subjects and object, such as, "her kicked me," and "Him my brother."

A characteristic of Black English is the omission of s or z, (Wolfram, 1971), on verbs in the third person singular. Examples: "She run home," for "She runs home." "The boy come here," for "The boy comes here." The s (z) is added to all other persons: "I stands on the steps," "We goes to the store," "You talks too fast," "They makes good food." Another is the use of BE: "Do it be dark at six o'clock?" "They be out playing all the time." The use of opposites, which is slang, is also characteristic: "He bad," meaning he's good, very good, or "She wearing a bad suit," meaning she's wearing a very attractive suit. Much of the slang of Blacks finds its way into common usage by nonwhites. Consider, "right on," "rap session." (Stewart, 1973).

Teachers of Black children might be puzzled when asked by a child, "Can I hold a pencil?" to find that he wants to borrow a pencil.

Language Development of the Black Child

Normal children, by the time they enter school, have learned the language patterns of their environment (Rake and Canter, 1974). The child has learned to speak by listening to the sounds around him, and repeating what he hears. For the innter city child this is often the simplest form of language structure. Often subjects are omitted and unnecessary modifiers almost never used.

Wolfram (1971) calls much Black English baby talk, and states that while most groups give up baby talk before entering school, the black

youngster holds on to it much longer, as late as high school. He also offers conclusions by Lubov that, "a young person is well into adolescence before he becomes aware of the social dimension of language, a fact that would seem to indicate that formal efforts to teach standard English would be most effective if delayed until junior high or later." I agree that there comes a time in an adolescent's life when he may realize that in order to escape from his environment he must overcome the handicap of poor language facility. He may then begin to seriously attempt to improve his language ability. He can and will easily slip back and forth between the two, Black English and Standard English. (Strickland, 1969).

THE BLACK CHILD AND THE SCHOOL

Black children are penalized because they come from homes where non-standard English is spoken. Not only do they hear it in their homes, but everyone around them speaks it. This "racial isolation" is complete for many inner-city black children. (Malmstrom, 12).

It has been stated that the child hears standard English on television, and can learn from this. I do not agree, because the television that he views is rather limited to the cartoons, mother's soap operas, and the police stories. If you assign some school related programs for homework,

he often cannot look at it because some adult has preempted the TV. Programs directed to this child are rarely viewed.

These children are also penalized by standardized tests. They are written in a language which he does not understand. He is unable to answer a question such as, "Why do you say they are different?" He will be able to give a response when the question is simplified to, "Why are they different?" (Davis, 1973) Then he is stigmatized by his low scores on these tests.

Black children have been labeled "non-verbal." In the opinion of Russman (1962), "The Black child understands more language than he speaks. The 'receptive' linguistic ability is better than the 'expressive' language." He further states that contrary to this opinion (non-verbal) Blacks use of slang and profanity fills a great deal of their conversation. This conversation goes on constantly in the Black community and is often very animated. Much of the slang, as has been noted previously, becomes a part of our language.

Bentley (1973) states that the love of verbal ability starts in early childhood for the Black child. Young Blacks entertain themselves by "sounding" on each other, a game of insulting those around you. They also enjoy "playing the dozens," talking about each other's mothers in a derogatory way.

Quoting Irving Taylor, Russman (1962) also adds that "they use words in a different way and are not as dependent on words for their sole form of communication, but that they are imaginative at the verbal level."

When black and white children were shown a stone and asked what it

was, white children gave words such as "pebbles" and "rocks," while Black children gave responses such as, "to throw in the water."

Herbert Kohl compiled the writings of "culturally deprived" sixth graders, labeled hopeless by his fellow teachers. This was after months of trying to use cirriculum guides with the children with very discouraging results. The writings had many misspelled words and grammatical errors, but he was so touched by the honesty, the depth of feeling and understanding by the children of their environment that he had them published into a book.

According to Allen (1969) many white teachers in earlier times, themselves from immigrant homes, learned to perfect their English as a social status symbol. They looked down on members of their families who continued to speak with accents or with a dialect. They were also intolerant of children who came to school speaking any type of dialect.

Ironically, this is true today of black teachers too, some of whom have had to rid their speech of dialect. They, in turn, are often as intolerant of the dialect spoken by black children. How, then, can this teacher help the less fortunate black student if he cannot see himself in these children?

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

It is important for teachers of black children to be able to differentiate between the Black dialect and mental ability. For too long black

children have been considered mentally inferior by white teachers because they speak non-standard English. Rather than label the black child's language as "bad" the teacher should accept a child's dialect for what it is, his dominant mode of communication, (Albert, 1974) and take the child from there. The teacher can add a new dialect to his language ability and gradually lead the child to alternate the non-standard with the standard. Johnson, (1973), states that the goal of language instruction should be to give the pupils language flexibility.

The teacher can "tune" the child's ear to correctness and motivate him in various ways to practice it at school, but do not expect it to carry over outside the school environment until he can be led to want something more for himself than his home offers. The poor language usage he hears at home is not easily discarded. (Strickland, 1969)

Children learn by example. After all, they learned to speak by imitating the speech of those closest to them. They will mimic the teacher, so the teacher's language must serve as a model to train the child's ear to hear correct forms, pronunciation, usage and sentence structure.

Labov suggests that the teachers should become students of dialects, and avail themselves of information on dialect patterns of black children. (1970)

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHING

In the classroom the teacher should provide opportunities for choral speaking, group dramatizations, role playing, speaking over the telephone, making announcements and listening to selected television program. (Strickland, 1969) Any child will find the role of another person fun to deal with and easier than his own and this gives him an opportunity to express himself as others do.

There should be sense-developing experiences. Trips around the neighborhood, trips by bus where he can "watch for" various things, signs of advertisements, speed limits, route signs, etc. Listening to things in the classroom, outside the window, sounds made by familiar objects. Tasting, touching, smelling, all of these provide opportunities to develop an awareness in the child.

Picture books should be realistic. Homes should look similar to his home. Mothers should look like his mother, neighborhoods should look like this neighborhood.

A unit on dialects can work effectively to let the child know that he is not unique in his dialect.

CONCLUSIONS

I have been in the midst of many heated arguments among black teachers when the statement, "accept the child's dialect," has been made. Many black teachers see this as an effort to perpetuate illiteracy among Blacks.

As a result of my reading and research I see, instead, efforts to give the Black dialect the same respect as other aspects of Black culture. It is distinctly as Afro-American as anything else in the culture of Blacks. This does not mean that all Blacks do or should speak the Black dialect, or that no effort should be made to teach standard English to black children. But the teacher should know something about the nature of dialects.

I also see that attitudes among educators have changed in a positive way so that there is hope for the Black, Puerto Rican, and other children who come to school with a language difference.

There are still teachers who label disadvantaged children as stupid or retarded because they speak a dialect. There are many Soledad, Californias where 20,000 Spanish speaking children were labeled mentally retarded and placed in special classes for the retarded, all because they could not pass standardized tests. (Link, 1971)

Black teachers themselves must learn to accept and respect Black English. After teaching standard English to black children, they should be encouraged to feel comfortable when he changes his dialect to suit his needs.

This article in no way is an attempt to cover the issue of Black English. There is so much being written and much that has been written on the subject that I would need a book to completely express all that I feel on the matter. There are many opinions as to what comprises Black English, its origins, ways to help those children who speak it, and I had to make some decisions about what to include in this article. Nevertheless, this has been a most enlightening experience, one that I wish I could share with every teacher who teaches black children.

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